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Artist and Surfer as Best Buddies

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

The exuberant three-gallery exhibition “Swell” is one of the Big Kahunas of the season’s group shows. Its requisite summertime theme is surfing, which runs wider and deeper than most, encompassing an array of visual material and several familiar characters, namely the American male as renegade and good buddy.

The show, which sprawls throughout the Chelsea spaces of NyeHaus, the Friedrich Petzel Gallery and Metro Pictures, spans more than half a century, from the 1950s to the present. In addition to scores of artworks it contains about two dozen surf boards, along with photographs, posters and other artifacts. Of the nearly 80 individuals whose efforts are represented here, fewer than 10 are women. This statistic reflects a significant lack of imagination, considering that a lot of the work here is merely vaguely oceanic. Nonetheless the show, which has been organized by Tim Nye of NyeHaus and Jacqueline Miro, an architect, urbanist and surfer, in concert with the staffs at Petzel and Metro Pictures, is ecumenical in other ways.

At the core of “Swell” is an excellent show that helpfully sets postwar Los Angeles art against a broader canvas of surfing, beachcombing and car and drug culture. But the key was surfing, with which art at that time shared both a rebel spirit and certain technologies borrowed from the airplane industry.

It adds both the Beat Generation assemblage of the 1950s and works by lesser-known artists to the more canonical history of the seductive high-gloss Finish Fetish sculptures and reliefs and the environmental “Light and Space” installation pieces that flourished in Los Angeles in the 1960s and ’70s. These last two movements were shown off this year in splendid isolation in “Primary Atmospheres,” a pristine show at NyeHaus and the [David Zwirner Gallery](#); 7 of the 10 artists in that show are represented here, sometimes by the same work.

But “Swell” has more grit, broader margins, more mess. And it evokes more fully the lost innocence of the time before the art world got big and before surfing — the beautiful sport, if not

game — became wildly popular and then turned professional. Unfortunately the show often loses its focus as it approaches the present, adding recent works by some of the older artists and several more by younger ones — including a few from New York and Europe — that are only tangentially pertinent.

Each gallery's presentation is different in terms of arrangement, clarity and ratio of older to newer work. A good place to start is Metro Pictures, where the past holds sway, and the historical progression is laid out in distinct segments. In the first space various forms of assemblage dominate, most forthrightly in George Herms's 1973 "Scientific American," a large grid of old shelves filled with all manner of detritus, including copies of the magazine for which it is named. It suggests a suite of boxes by a beachcombing [Joseph Cornell](#).

On the opposite wall Ashley Bickerton (a serious surfer who forsook New York — and the Neo-Geo style for which he was known — for Bali in 1993) combines assemblage with his own version of finish fetish. The result is "Jack Blaylock" (2001), a hyper-real portrait of what appears to be an aging, drug-ravaged surfer rendered on a giant piece of gorgeously finished wood that is festooned with bits of driftwood and surf-tossed footwear. The Los Angeles painter [Ed Moses](#) offers a palm-treed and beaded folding screen from this year, while works from the 1960s show Tony Berlant using painted tin to more or less obliterate the lines separating collage, assemblage and quilting. Recent works by Fred Tomaselli, a Brooklyn artist who kayaks the waters of the New York region, build images from cut-up magazines, [marijuana](#) leaves and pills. Works from the '60s by Wallace Berman and from the last decade by Robert [Dean Stockwell](#) and David Lloyd, another surfer-artist, contribute to the recycling effect, while [Ed Ruscha](#) chills everything out with a 1984 field of saffron vapors on which the words "Polynesian Sickness" float.

The overlap of art and surfing is most evident in the style and craft that permeates the second gallery at Metro, where one wall is lined with gleaming surfboards made over the last 50 years. The more austere are the work of well-known surfers who also excelled at the aerodynamic art of board shaping like Herbie Fletcher, Joel Tudor, Matt Kivlin and Donald Takayama.

The gaudier boards have been decorated by artists like Peter Alexander, Raymond Pettibon and Charles Arnoldi, although Jim Ganzer contributes a relatively sinister gray board that resembles a hammerhead shark. A 2004 board decorated by the street artist Barry McGee's reminds us that surfing spawned a landlocked cousin, skateboarding.

Several Finish Fetish paintings, wall reliefs and sculptures from the 1960s and '70s attest to the absorption of surf-board materials and techniques — cast fiberglass, resins, high-gloss finishes,

and luminous monochromes — by art. Note the fabulous confluence of streamlined forms in various shades of red and egg-yolk yellow by DeWain Valentine, Billy Al Bengston, John McCracken and Craig Kauffman. Especially striking is a yellow surfboard from 2006, shaped by the surfer Mike Hynson with a cherry red fin in translucent resin provided by Mr. Tudor.

Things turn atmospheric in the third space at Metro, where various examples of '60s-era Light and Space art include the glass boxes of Larry Bell, a wedge of cast polyester by Mr. Alexander, an odd canvas-on-canvas collage by Joe Goode and cast-resin reliefs and sculptures in shades of blue by Helen Pashgian, whose work was largely unknown until recently. She contributes a smoky blue sphere inset with clear polyester resin that conjures up the tube, or interior volume, of a giant wave. Recent photographs by Roe Ethridge and [Catherine Opie](#) capture real surfaces in action and on the beach.

In the upstairs space contemporary works by Mary Heilmann, Jay Battle, Ned Evans, Blake Rayne and Thaddeus Strode harmonize one way or another with earlier pieces by Mr. McCracken, Mr. Goode and Sister Mary Corita.

At Petzel things tilt toward contemporary with appropriately watery or druggy paintings and drawings from the last decade by Bill Komoski, Jeff Lewis, Cameron Martin, Wolfgang Bloch and Robert Longo, and a 2009-10 chunk of black (oil-tinted?) ocean in cast polyester resin by Alex Weinstein. A late-'80s video by Gary Hill provides intermittent surf sounds.

Blasts from the past include an edge-to-edge drawing of waves from 1970 by Vija Celmins; a marvelous “painting” of grafted sticks from 1974 by Mr. Arnoldi that is the ultimate in driftwood elegance; surfing cartoons from the late '60s by Robert Williams, Jim Evans and [R. Crumb](#). A 2001 greenish flourish in painted ceramic by Ken Price, one of the more accomplished artist-surfers, evokes both a hand and a wave represents the Finish Fetish generation, as do a cluster of surfboards by Mr. Fletcher from around 1970. The three largest replicate the shapes boards used by Hawaiian kings: surfing was originally a royal sport. But the boards' red, black and gold militaristic designs reflects the fact that G.I.'s stationed in the Pacific during World War II were among the first Americans to surf.

Mr. Bickerton is represented by a transitional non-Neo-Geo sculpture from 1993: a tall sinuous pedestal of Bali coral with a miniature tent on top. A series of color photographs by Rob Reynolds in the last two years pays tribute to the customized cars of Los Angeles in a dead-pan manner of Mr. Ruscha's 1960s images of things L.A.

At Nyehaus, where the show is ensconced in the gallery's somewhat decrepit town house, funkiness reigns, as does a certain documentary aesthetic. Black-and-white photographs by Bud Browne and Craig Stecyk fully convey the solitude, skill and risk of surfing. One by Mr. Stecyk, from around 1968, shows Miki Dora nonchalantly upright on a speeding board. Mr. Ganzer contributes some equally relaxed photographs of artists like Mr. Bell, Mr. Price and Laddie John Dill, who is represented at Nyehaus by a recent example of the sand and neon installation pieces he has made since the late 1960s. This work shares a darkened gallery with iridescent paintings on velvet from 1975 and 1984 by Mr. Alexander and a decidedly non-fetish-finish wall piece in banged-up aluminum by Mr. Bengston, from 1970-71.

Elsewhere five drawings by Mr. Pettibon iterate the obsession with waves signaled by his wave-covered surfboard at Metro Pictures. Peter Dayton turns the stripes typical of surfboards into a large painting on paper (2008), where they make for a slightly eccentric form of Pop-abstraction. And John Van Hamersveld's 2003 silkscreen of his well-known poster for Bruce Brown's 1966 surfing documentary "[The Endless Summer](#)" recalls the moment when the sport truly went global.

This exhibition demonstrates the rich and complicated entwining of art and surfing — two physically demanding disciplines with both fetishistic and mystical aspects. In general it affirms that art is always a reflection of the environment that produces it. In particular, it demonstrates once again that where postwar art is concerned, the East Coast still has much to learn about the West.

"Swell" is at Metro Pictures, 519 West 24th Street, (212) 206-7100, through July 30; and at Friedrich Petzel Gallery, 537 West 22nd Street, (212) 680-9467, and Nyehaus, 358 West 20th Street, (212) 366-4493, through Aug. 6; all in Chelsea.